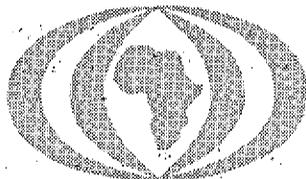


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## THE COMOROS: ISLAND POLITICS AND ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

The off-shore Indian Ocean Islands of the Comoros have received press coverage which suggests a breakthrough for Pretoria's diplomacy. This Brief Report focusses on the following:

1. Background Information and Statistics;
2. Political Developments;
3. Economic Developments; and
4. Relations with South Africa.

### 1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

#### LOCATION AND POLITICAL STATUS:

The Federal and Islamic Republic of the Comoros is an archipelago lying between the east coast of Africa (off northern Mocambique) and Madagascar. The group comprises four main islands - Njazidja, Nzwani, Mwali and Mayotte\*, as well as numerous other islets and coral reefs. The Capital is Moroni.

Member of the O.A.U. and the U.N.

Formerly a French Colony, declared itself independent June, 1975.

#### Head of State and of Government:

President Ahmed Abdullah (64)

#### Form of Government:

According to the 1978 Constitution, the Republic is ruled by an Executive President elected for 6 years by universal adult suffrage. He is assisted by a Council of Ministers headed by a Prime Minister responsible to the Executive.

Legislative powers are vested in the Federal Assembly, with 38 members directly elected for five years. Each main island has limited autonomy under a Governor and Council, dealing with local authority issues.

\* Mayotte is an overseas territory of France, but is claimed by the Comoros. For this Report, Mayotte is excluded unless specifically mentioned.

**Defence:** The national army, the Forces Armées Comoriennes is between 700 - 800 strong. There are about 20 French Officers.

**Population:** 354 000 (1980 estimate). (There are also 55 000 on Mayotte).

**Languages:** Official: Arabic and French  
Other: Comoran (a blend of Arabic and Swahili)

**ECONOMY:**

**Currency:** CFA Franc  
**GNP per capita:** U.S. \$300 (1980)

**Exchange rates:** 1 CFA Franc = 2 French Centimes (0,02 French Francs)  
1 £ Sterling = 561,75 CFA Francs; US\$ 1 = 310,75 CFA Francs.  
1 000 CFA Francs = £1,78 = US\$ 3,21

**Trading (Trend):** (Million CFA Francs)

	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980
Exports:	2 233	2 202	2 099	3 729	2 712
Imports:	3 319	4 053	4 329	6 135	6 147

**Budget (Recent):** (Million CFA Francs)

	1981	1982
Revenue:	1638,2	1898,0 projected
Expenditure:	3180,0	3202,0 projected

**Main Industries:** Light Industrial, e.g. distillation of essence, processing vanilla, soft-drink production.  
Tourism: Approximately 2 000 tourists per annum.

**Agriculture:** Less than 50% of land is arable, with large areas suitable only for subsistence farming.

**Imports:** Rice, other foodstuffs (meat, sugar, dairy produce, flour), petroleum products, transport equipment and machinery, textiles and clothing, chemicals, construction materials, footwear, paper, rubber goods and tobacco.

**Main Sources of Imports:** South Africa, France, Madagascar, Kenya, Tanzania, Pakistan and The People's Republic of China.

**2. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS**

After World War II, the Comoros were separated from Madagascar and directly administered by Paris; the islands were represented in the French National Assembly and Senate. With the Fifth Republic (1958), the Comoros remained a French Overseas Territory, but in 1961 they were granted self-government.

In the Sixties, power was shared by two political parties - the Comoros Democratic Union (UDC) and the Comoran Peoples Democratic Rally (RDPC). In December, 1972 the question of independence enjoyed high political saliency and in the elections of that year those parties advocating independence gained a clear majority.

The RDPC and the UDC and a third Party, the Comoros Progressive Party (PEC), formed a coalition which advocated independence. On the islands of Grande Comore (now Njazidja) and Anjouan (now Nzwani) and Mohéle (now Mwali) the coalition defeated Prince Said Ibrahim's UMMA Party which had supported the idea of independence, only with the consent of France. However, on the island of Mayotte, the coalition was defeated by the Mayotte Peoples Movement (MPM), with an 80% vote in favour of supporting the status quo, i.e. retaining the close link with Paris.

In July, 1975, the Chamber of Deputies voted for a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) and Ahmed Abdullah was elected as President of the new State, and a National Assembly was constituted. France made no attempt to intervene, but retained complete control of Mayotte.

However, Abdullah faced growing opposition from the United National Front (FNU), a new alignment of parties which favoured a more conciliatory policy towards Mayotte and opposed Abdullah's entrenched personal power.

On 3 August, 1975, the FNU staged a coup; Abdullah was overthrown and the National Assembly was abolished. A National Executive Council was established with Prince Said Mohamed Jaffar, leader of the FNU, as its head and Ali Soilih, leader of the coup, as a member.

In November, that year, the archipelago was admitted to the UN as a unified state, with the exception of Mayotte which France continued to administer. In February, 1976, Mayotte again voted to retain links with France. Relations between the Comoros and France became increasingly strained, leading to the withdrawal of all French administrative and technical staff and the cessation of all development assistance.

A new Constitution was introduced, with Ali Soilih as Head of State and all executive and legislative nominations in his hands. He immediately began to implement an extraordinary revolutionary programme, thought to be the most advanced in Africa. The civil service, for example, was dismantled and all records of French administration publicly burnt. All former ministries were abolished and replaced by two ministries of state covering all internal affairs, and three committees responsible to the Presidency. These proposals found little support outside the ruling group and proved impossible to implement.

The economy was in a chaotic state and the failure of the 1977 harvest, as a result of drought, caused chronic food shortages. Many Comorans fled the island preferring the freer atmosphere and prosperity of Mayotte. The result was widespread disaffection and, because of Mayotte's accessibility, a volatile and alienated population close at hand. Soilih survived four reported coup attempts in two and a half years.

In May, 1978, Soilih was overthrown in a coup carried out by about fifty European mercenaries led by a Frenchman, Bob Denard, on behalf of the exiled ex-President Abdullah, and Soilih was killed a fortnight later.

The government was then taken over by a "Politico-Military Directory" with Abdullah and his former deputy, Muhammed Ahmed, as Co-Presidents. A new constitution and elections were promised, and Abdullah announced his intention of restoring good relations with members of the Arab world.

Many African countries were alarmed by the events leading to the coup, and the Comoros was suspended from OAU meetings on the grounds that it was a régime installed by mercenaries. The mercenaries themselves were encouraged by the

new government to remain, and Denard was even appointed head of the armed forces. Their presence, however, became increasingly embarrassing and by the end of September, 1978, they were asked to leave the islands. Denard has, however, since returned.

Soon after the coup, economic relations were established with the Arab world and the EEC (through the Lomé Convention) and, in February 1979, the Comoran delegation was re-admitted to the OAU, signalling continental acceptance of the new régime.

In October, 1978, the complexion of the government changed with a referendum in which the population approved the new Constitution, creating a "Federal and Islamic Republic". New institutions were introduced which pivoted around the Presidency, the Council of Government, the Federal Assembly and the Supreme Court. Each island was given a certain degree of autonomy under an elected governor. Abdullah was elected President for a six year term and in December elections were held for the Federal Assembly of 38 members.

The 1978 Constitution envisaged Mayotte "rejoining the Comoran community" at some later date. However, the population of Mayotte continues to show no enthusiasm for co-operating with the new Comoran Government.

The Mayotte question still complicates relations with Paris, although some informed sources have suggested that the Elysée, under Mitterand, has promised the return of Mayotte to the Comoros before the end of the current Presidency. This will not, however, be an event without some resistance.

### 3. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

The economic survival of the Comoros depends on a continuous inflow of foreign aid, and as a result the government operates a permanent trade deficit. More importantly, scant natural resources and poor development prospects mean that the economy is in a disastrous condition.

Some 90 percent of export earnings is derived from four crops, ylang ylang<sup>⊙</sup>, vanilla, cloves and copra. Even in good years, the revenues from these products do not cover more than 60 percent of the total import bill. Furthermore, only a limited amount of arable land is available for domestic food production and food imports are an unavoidable burden to the economy. Rice imports alone accounted for about 20 percent of export earnings in 1980/81.

During the confusion of the Soilih period, exports of ylang ylang decreased markedly with the result that French consumers turned to synthetics. Presently the price of synthetics still undercuts the natural product with the resulting negative impact on the balance of trade. In addition, vanilla prices are depressed as a result of the international recession.

Foreign aid has traditionally covered the deficit but has been inadequate to allow capital formulation for development of either resources or infrastructure. While it appears that the tourist potential is high, the actual figures reveal that some 2 000 tourists per annum visit the islands (compared to the approximately 100 000 who visit Mauritius annually).

The country's infrastructure is poor, There are only 750 kilometers of inferior roads. Port facilities are also inadequate with only three antiquated boats serving as the link between the three islands and Mayotte.

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⊙ An extract used in the manufacture of perfume oil.

The country has to rely totally on bilateral and international aid to remain solvent. In 1980/81 total external debt amounted to US\$ 605 million, with debt servicing for the year equivalent to 27 percent of government income. With GDP of only US\$ 70 million per annum, many donors were questioning whether, without major government attempts to initiate planning, further development loans would be too much of a burden for the economy. Abdullah made attempts to initiate this planning at the end of 1982.

#### 4. RELATIONS WITH SOUTH AFRICA

Recent press reports indicate that South Africa has planned diplomatic ties with the Comoros, but these cannot be officially verified. There do, however, seem to be growing economic links between Pretoria and Moroni.

It has been confirmed that South African interests will be involved in the following initiatives:

1. Opening an indirect air link between Johannesburg and Moroni via Blantyre, in July 1983.
2. Organising an agricultural development scheme using South African expertise, and the launching of a housing scheme.
3. Co-ordinating a R100-million resort project, which includes a R30-million loan from the IDC.
4. Providing South African experts to help the islands establish their own fishing industry.

While the Comoran Government has denied any diplomatic links with Pretoria, the South African Trade Commissioner in Réunion is accredited to the Comoros. In addition some 50 percent of the country's imports (foodstuffs, clothing, and building equipment) come from South Africa. (These are shipped via Durban in the cargo vessel "Rodrigues" which makes a round trip every six weeks).

While the Abdullah Government appears happy with the South African economic link, some reports suggest that these have not been favourably viewed by Paris and the local expatriate community. However, as has been the case too often in Africa's experience in dealing with Pretoria, South Africa's purse is full of irresistible arguments.

JAN SMUTS HOUSE,  
JUNE 1983.